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Elgar



*Handbook of Research Methods  
and Applications for*

# **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

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## 8. Cross-sectoral dialogues with social movements in Southeast Asia: translating values, affects, and practices in a polymorphic region

*Gabriel Facal, Catherine Scheer, Sarah Anaïs Andrieu, Joel Mark Baysa-Barredo, Giuseppe Bolotta, Gloria Truly Estrelita, Rosalia Sciortino, Saskia E. Wieringa, and Wijayanto*

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It might seem evident that the context in which social movements are taking place and the movements themselves shape who does research with/on them, how this relates to movements' own needs, and how different kinds of research and thought about movements interact. However, researchers in privileged global regions or studying well-known movements tend not to acknowledge this influence, even if they too are affected by regional context and the nature of the movements involved. The example of research with/on social movements in Southeast Asia sheds light on how unfamiliar sociopolitical specificities and frictions between different cosmologies must be taken into account to think about such movements, and invites the reader to decenter their point of view.

In a region marked by colonial legacies and stark inequalities, social movements have historically triggered democratic transitions, at least in some parts of Southeast Asia, such as in Thailand in 1973, in the Philippines in 1986, in Burma in 1988, and in Indonesia and Malaysia in 1998. More recently, significant setbacks to democracy, and the resurgence of autocratic arrangements across the region (with the notable exception of Timor-Leste), have prompted civil society groups to adopt new forms of organized activism, particularly amongst the youth, demanding the protection of democratic institutions. In Indonesia, mass demonstrations of university students just managed in 2019 to prevent the passing in parliament of a very controversial revision of the Criminal Code (Wieringa 2020). More engagement came about at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when street protests were held in conjunction with online militancy. In Thailand, youth-led mass protests have been challenging the army's grip on power, as well as the royal foundation of the Thai social body. Just the last half of 2020 saw close to 400 demonstrations, staged by 112 different youth groups in 62 provinces all over the country (McCargo 2021: 188; Horatanakun 2022). The military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021 gave rise to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), led by young human rights defenders, calling for a return to a civilian-led democratic government. This then escalated into further violence and purging of those who are nonaligned with the military government's agenda. In the Philippines, young supporters of former Vice President Leni Robredo took to the streets in 2022 to campaign against the return into power of a member of the infamous Marcos family, resembling the People Power Revolution of 1986 (Yabes 2022).

Some of these struggles have eventually transformed into transnational solidarity networks, such as the Milk Tea Alliance, initiated by youth activists in Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Phattharathanasut 2022). It has rapidly grown in size, transgressing national boundaries, and now includes large numbers of pro-democracy youth members in Myanmar, the Philippines, and India. The initial demands of these loosely structured networks, while specific to each country but all marked by the contestation of China's growing influence in the region, have been articulated with substantive claims to increase the space for democratic participation.

These struggles echo deeper-rooted uprisings. Decades ago, social movements were notably at the forefront of anti-colonial struggles. In the 1950s and 1960s, they engaged in electoral contests with and through parties, and undertook sustained dialogues with state authorities. They have not restricted their political activity to the sphere of the "civil society," which has been slower to emerge than in other regional contexts, such as in Latin America. This relative slowness is linked to the different forms of state control to which civil societies are exposed in Southeast Asia, and which involve coercion, proscription (Sidel 2015), and surveillance. It can also be attributed to the territorial differentiation that governments operate in national spaces (Ong 2002). These modes of governance rely on vernacular props—religious hierarchies, patron–client loyalties, civil–military security networks, and patriarchies—and on authoritarian policies that produce normative pressures, in a context where religion, economics, and politics are deeply intertwined (Facal et al. forthcoming).<sup>1</sup>

After a decade of democratic advancement in several countries of the region at the beginning of the 21st century, the last few years have been marked by the reinvigoration of authoritarian arrangements, in particular through the restriction of political space for opposition movements and greater surveillance and manipulation, especially of digital media (Sastramidjaja et al. 2021; Norén-Nilsson 2021). These arrangements are increasingly circumvented by the development of new public spaces and the e-agera provided by the Internet and social media. The intensification of mobility, the circulation of information, and the proliferation of means of communication allow, for example, the aggregation of indigenous movements with transnational citizen networks. They also fuel the possibilities of solidarity across borders, as illustrated by the outpouring of citizen support for the CDM and dissidents against the military coup in Myanmar. Finally, the 21st century is marked by the assertion of women at the forefront of protests (Wieringa and Katjasungkana 2012). During the COVID-19 pandemic they were at the heart of the care work and were forcefully propelled into a position of increased vulnerability. But feminist demands have also been made more audible and become amplified by the burgeoning feminist movements. This has helped to expose systemic and long-standing failures and has accelerated the blossoming of postcolonial struggles.

Regionally, a number of factors—the contentious influence of a globalized, colonial-era modernist rationality on indigenous scholarship; the increasingly illiberal profile of governments; and the narrowness of political space for public expression—have all led to a compartmentalized scientific production, which makes collaborative scientific projects difficult to be sustained and go long term. This is also due to the short-sightedness of academic institutions and funding agencies. Regional mobilizing dynamics have been documented and informed by work on civil society (Aspinall and Weiss 2012; Berenschot et al. 2017), social activism (Ford 2013), and transnational activist networks (AltDev 2023), as well as an array of research on specific sectors, such as feminist, human rights, indigenous, and environmental activism. This production highlights the emergence of competing definitions of the political subject in relation to the state and sovereignty in Southeast Asia. The state of the art on practices of resistance to

the state and corporate patterns of governance and development is polarized between the study of revolutionary and radical exit from the state (Scott 2008), and the observation that political critiques are almost never “world-making” or detached from capitalist ideology (Li 2005).

It is crucial to acknowledge that globalized notions, or “universals” (Tsing 2005), such as democracy, gender equality, and human rights, are not culturally and historically neutral, for they have Eurocentric, middle- and upper-class genealogies. Whilst youth activists in Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar advocate for democracy, they might well interpret this concept in different, culturally and historically situated, ways that do not necessarily match with each other. In this respect these different worlds may benefit from cross-sectoral (sectors of academia, aid practitioners, advocates, concerned citizens) dialogue, through the possibility of the anthropological work of “translation” offered by this dialogue (Merry 2006; Saleminck 2006; Gal 2015); a political-cum-scientific task that social scientists might be well positioned to facilitate. Rather than considering global norms such as “democracy” as static entities which are homogeneously and linearly diffused from transnational or national to local levels, it is important to emphasize their continuous reformulation and reinvention as they move through actor-networks (Bolotta et al. 2019: 248). This process entails a constant transformation, which implies, as observed by Michel Callon (1980: 211): “creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different.” The cross-sectoral dialogues which we describe in this chapter have in fact initiated a process of multi-polar, bottom-up, and decentralized translations that might bring about significant societal transformations in Southeast Asia.

The authors of this chapter are developing a network of critical actors comprised of researchers, activists, and concerned citizens from within and outside Southeast Asia engaged in a reflexive approach on how cross-sectoral dialogue can highlight the ongoing processes in which social movements are involved in the region. This cross-sectoral research is then thought of as a process through which the object of study, namely social movements, is itself transformed.

## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: TACKLING DISRUPTED DEMOCRACIES AND AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

In contemporary Southeast Asia, processes of democratization initiated in countries with more liberal political systems since the end of the 1990s have been accompanied by the resumption of development policies by the states. In addition, thanks to the affirmation of national sovereignty within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the rhetorics of decolonialism, subalternism, and postmodernism have contributed to increase Southeast Asian actors’ ownership of nongovernmental development programs. This transition has resulted in a greater local involvement in decision-making and in executive committees of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, and think-tanks, but also in an intensification of sectoral crossovers between activism, journalism, public service, and academic and scientific research. These new actors and institutions are also more open to convergences between struggles, and to supra-regional solidarities around causes such as demands for greater gender equality, rights of migrants, solutions to transboundary pollution, demands for digital literacy, and the protection of academic freedom and press rights. These different fields are increasingly articulated under the banner of demands for social justice in an inclusive dimension, resulting

in the construction of cross-community, cross-linguistic, and cross-national networks; as part of a more global trend (Zajak et al. 2020) which has so far been very uneven across Southeast Asia.

In recent years, this inclusive shift has been fostered by new media, particularly through digital technology. In two decades, the region (684 million inhabitants) has become one of the world's biggest users of digital media with more than 500 million users. This seizure of digital space allows for a better dissemination of ideas, more convergence between struggles, transnational alliances, and a better synchronization of actions on the ground, articulating digital activism with door-to-door militancy. In a context where social criticism oscillates between strategical "politeness" (Priyadi 2022) or "modesty," framed in the "civil," "incivil," or "uncivil,"<sup>22</sup> digital tools have allowed the articulation of a greater plurality of modes of claim and action. These levers are at the heart of the record-breaking protests that have taken place in recent years, involving both social movements and anti-social movements led by conservative religious forces, ethnicist/regionalist factions, nationalist militia auxiliaries to the regimes, or pro-monarchic paramilitary groups. The digital space is becoming a powerful tool for authoritarian regimes, cyber troops, and corporative elites to increase significantly their forms and levels of political surveillance, disseminate "fake news," and influence individual and collective perspectives on a range of issues through hoaxes and other forms of manipulation.

Innovation in the digital sphere is also undertaken by social movements: aside from the public trending hashtags on social media platforms such as X/Twitter and Facebook, there is an increasing collaboration and sharing of initiatives on digital media, such as through webinars, conferences, training tools, and crowdsourced online documents. Demonstrations are broadcast live on Facebook, which increases coverage and allows people to interact with the movements. Platforms such as Clubhouse, Discord, and TikTok have helped to disseminate modes of protest (flash mobs, spontaneous and decentralized gatherings) and symbols are borrowed from protesters elsewhere in East Asia, such as Hong Kong's umbrellas and rubber ducks. With digital tools, even more distant movements are a source of inspiration, such as with Black Lives Matter, which instigated the Papuan Lives Matter movement in eastern Indonesia. While the #MeToo movement has had very little response, in many countries there is a strong mobilization against violence against women. In Thailand and Myanmar, the fight against patriarchy and for gender diversity is seen as an integral part of the struggle for democracy, while the prominence of critique of the economic model is existent but uneven.

Besides digital media, international pop culture references have also reinforced supra-local convergence of struggles and mutual influence. The three-finger salute from the *Hunger Games* novels, popularized by Thai youth activists after the 2014 military coup, is now an icon of dissent across the region, particularly among Generation Z youths, and has recently become the prime symbol of protest against the military government in Myanmar. In Thailand, people made a mockery of the government's tax policy by comparing it to the ever-hungry hamster Hamtaro, featured in a well-known Japanese cartoon, and the royalist yellow-shirts were compared to the Minions (Lippert 2021). In Cambodia, over 100 inhabitants of Prey Lang forest dressed as the forest people from the movie *Avatar* when, in 2011, they came to demonstrate against the destruction of their living space in the capital city of Phnom Penh (Duara 2014).

More deeply, the recent shifts in popular mobilization concern the modalities of organization, with joint protests being loosely coordinated or synchronized. Decentralized leadership and strong horizontality within the groups leave room for tactical creativity and allow for a wide range of issues to be addressed. In Myanmar, after the coup, teachers, doctors, bank



managers, students, and engineers joined the newly formed CDM, and refused to work under the Special Administrative Council (SAC) regime. Moreover, they not only form a ‘fluid’ mass of mobilized groups, but they also project their struggle into the institutional space. On February 5, 2021, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a group of the National League for Democracy (NLD) lawmakers, and members of parliament ousted in the *coup d'état*, formed a government in exile, the National Unity Government (NUG), in cooperation with several ethnic minority political groups; not without persistent tensions, though. This broad coalition converges with an openness to the plurality and inclusiveness of struggles. For the first time, people from the cities and plains of the Bamar Buddhist ethnic majority heartland held messages in solidarity with the Rohingya community, which has been targeted by a genocidal campaign fueled by hardliner Buddhist monks in Rakhine state from August 2016 onwards. Despite a terrible human toll, in Myanmar and abroad, networks and communities of teachers, doctors, gamers, filmmakers, lawyers, pastors, students, and farmers continue to strike, document, fundraise, advocate, and organize towards a common objective, which is the establishment of a federal democratic Myanmar.<sup>3</sup>

Women are also determined to continue to speak up for their rights, as they started rebuilding a feminist movement in the mid-2010s that had been initiated in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s. In some countries, sexual rights movements gain greater visibility, whereas in others they face great resistance. In Indonesia, we could mention the ever-delayed law against sexual violence (RUU PKS, finally passed in April 2022), or the outcry against the 2021 Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture about Prevention and Treatment of Sexual Violence in Higher Education.

## INTER-RELATED SOCIOCULTURAL CONDITIONS FOR CROSS-SECTORAL DIALOGUE

The value and limits of cross-sectoral dialogue around social issues depend on the regime in which this dialogue takes place. In national spaces open to public debate, such as Indonesia, the alliance between activists and academics that the media relays through the press, and the dialogue with progressive political parties, allow them to expose socially significant themes. One is the need for better protection of the anti-corruption commission (the Save KPK movement), relating to economic distribution and social justice. This dialogue also sustains the possibility to criticize the harmful social and environmental consequences of the labor deregulation law (the Tolak Omnibus Law protests in 2020), as well as to protest against the plan to amend the Constitution to enable the President to remain in power for a third mandated term.

On the other hand, in contexts marked by stricter state surveillance and repression, cross-sectoral dialogues take place in a more underground manner, or require the intervention of exiled researchers (e.g. Beban et al. 2019). In 2018, for example, Cambodian youth of the Clean Fingers campaign had to take a subtle approach to boycott the fraudulent election against the state’s fallacious pluralist liberal democratic objective (Siahaan 2019). The murder of environmental activist Chut Wutty in 2012 is a dramatic illustration of how dangerous it is in Cambodia to speak out against land-grabbing and illegal logging. In this context, Cambodians fighting to defend their land recurrently rely on the support of foreign NGOs and researchers, contributing to connect them to global coalitions, who provide semantic and material resources, and might also be seen as a form of diplomatic protection by proxy.

Farmers from an indigenous minority who lost their fields and forests to large-scale rubber plantations, joined a transnational alliance in 2014, connecting them to people in Indonesia and on the African continent who were all damaged by the same Luxembourg-based company. One year later, another segment of affected villagers brought their case to a French court, accusing a major shareholder of the Luxembourg company of destroying their living space, a legal action that has so far been without success (Mahanty et al. 2021).

Such long and complex processes might require researchers to withhold academic publication, while providing contextual briefings to involved parties. Talking about positionality also leads to questioning the status of the people involved in research, for instance regarding the definition of who is considered as an outsider to the struggle, and what kind of foreignness conditions legitimacy for engagement. Administrative recognition, cultural, family, or work involvement matter at different degrees, and an outsider can also be a person from a different class or social background. Foreignness, as a social construct, can be used in authorities' counter-narratives to disqualify opposition, notably by presenting it as endorsing neocolonial efforts to impose external goals. In Indonesia, for instance, authorities and conservative political actors commonly attempt to amalgamate social struggles with separatist, communist, or anarchist factions; in comparable ways to the Philippines (Magsalin 2020). Hardliner religious groups even equate their hatred of communism with that of LGBTQIA+ people.

In view of the government's defiance of research conducted by foreigners on national soil, in countries such as Indonesia foreign academics face increased difficulties in obtaining research visas. Synergies are therefore set up between Indonesian and foreign colleagues in order to facilitate fieldwork on the one hand, and to publish in international formats (notably to bypass the English language barrier) on the other hand. The partnership between regional and foreign research centers allows for the completion of research projects that are too politically sensitive to be dealt with within their country of origin (for instance, anti-royalist mobilizations in Thailand; civil society struggles against the junta in Myanmar; anarchism in Indonesia; queer demands in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia; land struggles and environmental protection in Cambodia). Interactions on the most sensitive topics are carried out through encrypted messaging and sharing platforms. In some cases, such as with Indonesian anarchist activists who rely on self-organization, monetary exchanges among and with research collaborators are done via cryptocurrencies (Andrieu et al. forthcoming).

Social issues are framed not only by political systems, but also by historical, cultural, and religious institutions, and therefore closed political spaces may regulate public debate against the confiscation exercised by otherwise dominant social forces. Institutionalized historical and cultural factors can explain why same-sex relations are more tolerated in Thailand, by contrast for instance to Malaysia and Indonesia, where barriers are imposed by conservative Muslim factions, or to the Philippines where the Church bans sexual behavior considered as immoral.<sup>4</sup> Another factor limiting social change is linked to agents situated between society and the state, and their control of the politics of memory. In Indonesia, oligarchies and political-economic elites linked to the regime of President Suharto block any initiative to raise the memory of the anti-communist massacres perpetrated in 1965–1966. For more than 30 years, the New Order administration under Suharto banned any publication that offered a different interpretation of Indonesian history. In addition, under the pretext of securing orders, the military-controlled press publications regulate what people read (Estrelita 2010), and today their version of history is the public's main reference. However, following the overthrow of the regime in 1998, a number of movements, such as the *Bergerak 65* Museum in Yogyakarta, the *Taman 65*

community in Bali, and the Belok Kiri festival in Jakarta, were formed to offer alternative narratives of such tragedy. A gathering called Kamisan is organized every Thursday by survivors of human rights violations and their relatives, together with activists, academics, and artists, to urge the government to act on prior human rights violations.

Commemorations of Southeast Asia's silenced past—such as the 1976 Thammasat University massacre in Thailand (Winichakul 2020), or atrocities committed against Muslims in the Philippines—are an important part of today's (youth) activism in the region (Castillo 2022). Events engraved in the collective memory are re-emerging as part of a dialogue between forbidden academic scholarship and pro-democracy activism. After the 2014 coup, several Thai academics were summoned by the military junta for “attitude adjustment.” Some of these dissident scholars fled out of the country and sought asylum abroad, but they continued to play active roles in shaping strategies of resistance within the country. Notably, over 1 million Thai youth activists found a place to give voice to their criticism against the Thai monarchy online, in a Facebook group entitled Royalist Marketplace (Chachavalpongpun 2020). The founder of this group is a Thai historian and political scientist, Pavin Chachavalpongpun, who was accused of lese-majesty and took refuge in Japan. Royalist Marketplace has been an influential factor in calling for monarchy reform, as protesters in Bangkok repeatedly displayed Royalist Marketplace signs across protest sites.

It is especially in the context of these intercultural dialogues that the cross-sectoral approach finds its interest. Platforms on which dialogues and interactions are established help in sharing ideas and practices as well as challenges, render social agents more proactive, and contribute to solving problems. They are able to frame objectives that go beyond particularistic aims and are then more appealing to the wider public and not only to specialized sectors. This results in pluralized modes of mobilization—silent strikes, flash protests, mass nonattendance of school, but also manifestos, collaborative publishing—and, finally, the ability to articulate and give visual and intelligible representation to local struggles. This plurality extends the sphere of what can be said, it strengthens legitimacy in the eyes of the greater public and decision-making circles, and influences rhetoric of representative institutions, such as parties (Lippert 2021: 5) or transnational instances such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR).<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, the space for cross-sectoral dialogue is framed by the strategies that activists and authorities develop respectively to delineate the room for public debate. Garry Rodan and Caroline Hugues (2014) highlighted that when governments and national elites create accountability institutions and reform programs, they do not always automatically respond to social movements' claims. Instead, they recalibrate their power bases after the collapse of authoritarian regimes. In Indonesia, for instance, the economic–military oligarchy remained in power after the 1998 overthrow of the Suharto regime. For activists to avoid backlashes against what can be interpreted as “Western meddling,” they may strive to ensure that support appears less politically charged than classic international democracy promotion. “Capacity-building activities that focus on, for example, civic education, environmental protection, gender justice, and digital governance can serve to bring together civic society actors in Southeast Asia without alarming the ruling regimes” (Sombatpoonsiri 2021: 9). Finally, by involving bureaucrats and elected people in platforms of debate and reflection, activists do not merely pressure public authorities but also refine their claims or make them become more acceptable.

## INCREASED FLUIDITY OF THE RESEARCHERS' STATUS AS A RESOURCE FOR MUTUAL EMPOWERMENT?

The conditions for cross-sectoral dialogue have evolved in parallel to the conditions underlying social movement action. Since the late 1980s, there has been an increased involvement of Southeast Asian people in positions of leadership in international NGOs, foundations, and think-tanks advocating for social progress, with more pluralism in general and in terms of women involvement and gender representativity.

By examining movements that foster alternatives to the political projects promoted by states, transnational agencies, and financial market actors, many scholarly contributions (Ciavolella and Boni 2015) point to a circularity of values and programs between social science, radical political theory, and social movements. They all aim to understand and construct alternative ways of thinking and doing politics. Reciprocal influences are evident in the conceptualization of themes such as egalitarianism, deliberative assembly, consensus, and solidarity; cross-culturally contentious concepts, which are interpreted differently across time and space, often in strong contrast to Euro-American, middle-class understandings. This is especially true in Asian societies that are historically organized around cosmological frameworks centered on hierarchy. Translation work, once again, is required. The important and brave work of Southeast Asian scholars and public intellectuals, such as Tongchai Winichakul and Chayan Vaddhanaputi in Thailand, Khin Mar Mar Kyi in Myanmar, and Amalinda Savirani in Indonesia, to name only a few, has marked social sciences and social movements in their home countries and across the region. Further, certain social activists have relied on and “translated” Western anarchist, libertarian, and post-Marxist anthropological and sociological studies—notably by James Ferguson (1985), James C. Scott (1998), and David Graeber (2007)—as levers of legitimization and means of militant information. They used these resources to supervise their activities, to question public authorities, to mobilize, and even to reinforce requests for funding (Edelman 2009: 251). This point could be more central in the years to come, since in the last decade civil society organizations have seen their funding melting away (Sciortino 2018). Moreover, several Southeast Asian countries have moved up from poor to (higher) middle-income countries, so they do not qualify any more for certain forms of funding; however, local philanthropy does not always fill that gap, notably out of worry about antagonizing governments.

For their part, Southeast Asian academics have endured a general and unidirectional dynamic of individualization of the professional profiles. They are evolving in a regional context where the norm is based on university and research rankings, bibliometrics, and citation indexes, but also where the private sector (and particularly the commercial and advertising sector) represents a significant outlet for young social scientists. This important trend implies more internationalization, but less cohesive force in the local laboratories, less collective contact with the communities in the field, and finally, an individualized space for initiative regarding cross-sectoral collaboration instead of long-term team projects. Academics are also expected to communicate more with the public outside academia, through open access publishing, digital media dissemination, and other more conventional tools for broadcasting, such as the radio and TV. In Indonesia this general public communication comes in the form of politicization, bureaucratization, and commercialization. The political supervision of research by the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), with Megawati Sukarnoputri (head of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle PDI-P, the presidential party since 2014) as

the chairwoman of the steering committee, has provided another constraint for researchers' engagement with grassroots issues.

The authoritarian governmental temptations that are recursively punctuating Southeast Asia's postcolonial history intensified since the pandemic and crystallized in the academic environment, with a general tightening of the mechanisms of propaganda and censorship manifested in the control of recruitment, funding, and scientific content produced and delivered to students. The intersections between social mobilizations and the epistemology of social science therefore resonate with the challenges faced by scientists to defend their professional interests in a context of increased political and institutional constraints, leading them on the one hand to further highlight their transfer and dissemination activities, but also to act to transform their concrete professional condition, such as through the Indonesian Caucus for Academic Freedom (KIKA) which is becoming more and more transnational (Wasis and Wiratraman 2020).

Within this context of double pressure, to overcome material or funding failures, cross-sectoral reconversion can provide work opportunities to both militants (who convert to academics or address new kinds of funders) and academics (who increase their chances to attract consultancies and private funding for their PhD or career). Cross-sectoral dialogue may enhance legitimacy for joint project demands, as it appears in several international funding scheme requirements, such as in those for foundations or even in the Horizon Europe scientific program to which Southeast Asian scholars may apply with their European counterparts. These trends lead to an increased hybridity of profiles and to more dynamic cross-sectoral itineraries for engaged researchers, whose status may morph between grassroots intellectuals, movement theoreticians, university-based committed researchers, citizen-scholars, and more militant producers of knowledge.

This increased status porosity and these hybridities facilitate the building of alliances based on affinity rather than on solidarity. In analyses of Latin American and European successes in relation to gender policies, it was found that most progress was made when the "triangle of empowerment" between activists, academics, and feminist policy-makers ("femocrats") worked well (Vargas and Wieringa 1998). With affinity politics, protagonists may decide on shifting alliances, depending on particular interests. So, members of different identity groups, professional associations, or political parties may come together to struggle for particular issues, such as strengthening specific human, women's, or sexual rights, while they keep their allegiance to their original association or party. A politics of affinity requires an open mind to search for similarities of goals while the different partners may harbor different views on various issues. This requires a politics of coalition-building on the basis of shared interests (Wieringa 2020).

## CONCLUSION: UNEVEN SUCCESSES OF CROSS-SECTORAL DIALOGUE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN SOCIAL MOBILIZATIONS

Ongoing and recent mass movements advocating for democracy (in Cambodia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar) show sociological shifts in terms of rejuvenation of the protesters (examples of youth-led movements that contrast with the more intergenerational red-shirts movement in Thailand or the Bersih movement in Malaysia), most of whom

are young (Bolotta 2023) and digitally connected, using pop culture as a common referent. This youth-led “generational revolution” has direct implications for scholars, establishing the epistemic priority of “childhood” over “parenthood” as the main analytical lens through which to investigate contemporary Southeast Asia (Bolotta 2021). Often, these movements restrict their ambitions to categorical causes, sometimes embracing exclusionary and discriminatory logics. However, it also happens that they take up an inclusive shape (for example, through—complex and uncertain, possibly strategically essentialist—multi-convergence in Myanmar) and bring forth broader aspirations. At present, this openness seems crucial in considering alternatives to the systemic crises brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Baysa-Barredo et al. 2021) to environmental, religious, political, cultural, economic, and social realities. This open approach is also valuable in the face of the geopolitical tensions resulting from polarization between the United States and China, which reframe the importance of Southeast Asia in the international game and could provide new opportunities for social movements’ transboundary convergences.

At a time when the legitimacy and accountability of civil society organizations are increasingly questioned by governments, and their social and financial resources significantly diminished (Sciortino 2018), cross-sectoral dialogue and collaboration can strengthen people’s capacities to translate their social demands to various audiences, including religious or customary bodies, policy-makers, and funding bodies. In contrast to the common perception of the limited public impact of researchers in the field, many collaborative projects show that in several countries in the region, cross-sectoral research platforms have a significant influence on public awareness and decision-making on critical issues.<sup>6</sup> The results of collaborative investigations inspire policies on gender equality, and the inclusion of marginalized segments of the population in development agendas, political participation, and public action. Moreover, the reciprocal influence of academic and activist work has led to both increased efforts by authorities to regulate research activities, and self-organization initiatives to defend academic freedom.

These Southeast Asian experiences of cross-sectoral collaboration raise questions that could be asked elsewhere, by adapting the ways in which multiple points of view on the object of study converge, and by adjusting the degree of proximity that researchers (can) have toward their object as well as their positional reflexivity. How do researchers connect to research subjects at different levels—within research groups, and between social movements, the population, and institutions—and how do such connections reframe the possibilities for action and social transformation? Sharing ideas with colleagues active in other parts of the world about these questions would for sure be an enriching experience.

## NOTES

1. This intertwining, however, is also politically instrumentalized through a culturalist rhetoric calling for “Asian values” (Thompson 2021).
2. Thanks to Laurence Cox, in general for his insightful comments on this chapter, and in particular for drawing our attention to the work of Jai Sen, who distinguishes between civility, uncivility, and incivility, and the normative, progressive, or regressive dynamics that these categories entail.
3. See Visual Rebellion (n.d.), “Real Stories from Myanmar,” <https://visualrebellion.org/>.
4. See Peletz (2009) on the ways in which colonial policies and conservative religious movements in the 19th and 20th centuries constricted the space in which gender pluralism was lived in Southeast

Asia. It is to be noted that in many cases, religious institutions may also defend social justice (see, for instance, the initiative of a Christian figure in Pham Thi 2020).

5. Andrieu and Facal, interview with Yuyun Wahyuningrum, representative of AICHR's Indonesian delegation, July 2022.
6. Estrelita and Facal, interview regarding human rights advancement, with Usman Hamid, head of Amnesty International Indonesia, July 2022.

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